



# Han Suyin

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*When calm and lovely death shall come for me, it will add to my treasure trove of love. I shall be one of a goodly company. How can I forget what the dead gave me? Chou Enlai and Chen Yi and Kung Peng -- how strong is their whisper in my spirit: None of us live for ourselves alone. That is the way of the beast; the way of Man is to live for others, for posterity. And this is what I too have tried to do.*

— from Phoenix Harvest

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## Quick Facts

- \* Born in 1917
- \* Chinese novelist, biographer, and essayist
- \* Wrote historical biographies of Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai

## Biography

Born on September 12th, 1917 in Sinyang, the province of Henan, China, Han Suyin is the pen name of an outstanding contemporary novelist of Belgian and Chinese origin. Born Chou Kuanghu (the Moon Guest) vee Elisabeth Rosalie Matthilde Clare Chou, Han's present official name is Dr. Elisabeth Comber. Han writes mainly in English, although some of her books have been written in French and Chinese as well. She claims to have written twenty-two books in English, and this number seems to be accurate. Han's works may generally be divided into three thematic categories: (i) autobiography/history, (ii) fiction, and (iii) sociopolitical essays and other written testimonies.



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### (i) Autobiography / History

Books falling in this category embrace a turbulent history of modern China, starting from the last quarter of the nineteenth century and ending with the Cultural Revolution in the 1970s. In these books, the author presents a vast panorama of Chinese political, social, and intellectual life, and its dynamic evolution from the last decades of the feudal Manchu dynasty's rule over China through a long and unsteady period of civil wars, followed by the Sino-Japanese war as a Far Eastern equivalent of the World War II (1937-1945), until the initial three decades of the Communist regime (starting from the power takeover in 1949). Upon this breathtaking background of public events which have involuntarily engaged one fifth of mankind, she sketches an intimate history of her father's family clan, the Hakka Han gentry named Chou from the remote and conservative province of Sichuan. Her attempt to introduce and explain to the Western reading public contemporary Chinese life in all the richness of its facets in certain ways reminds one of the Russian writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn and his magnificent epic prose.

Apart from the above autobiography / history volumes, Han Suyin wrote two very important biographies, one of Chairman Mao (in two volumes) and another one of Premier Zhou Enlai. Historical biographies of these two major figures on the political scene of the Communist China explain to Westerners the sequence of political events leading to the Communist revolution and the specificity of the Chinese version of communism imprinted by the historical as well as philosophical tradition of China.

### (ii) Fiction

In most cases, the books falling in this category describe episodes from the author's personal life, although some of them do that in an indirect and sometimes even a densely veiled manner.

1. *Destination Chungking* is Han Suyin's literary debut. It was written during the Sino-Japanese war by a twenty five years old author, employed as a qualified midwife in the American Christian hospital in Chengtu, the capital town of the Sichuan province. It was written with aid of another person (an unnamed American missionary, employed as a woman doctor in the same Chengtu hospital). The book makes a somewhat idealized account of the initial years of Han Suyin's first marriage with an aristocrat and a high-ranked military man, the brutal and bloody events of the Sino-Japanese war providing a realistic and impressive background to this personal story.



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2. *A Many-Splendoured Thing* was the greatest literary success in Han Suyin's career. It describes a love affair between the author (then a medical doctor in Hong Kong) and Ian Morrison, the foreign correspondent of The London Times and the son of the Australian George Morrison, once a renowned journalist working for the same daily. The love affair lasted several months and was suddenly interrupted by Ian's front line death in Korea, when reporting on the Korean war. In 1955, the book was made into a movie called *Love Is a Many Splendoured Thing*, which was distinguished with two Academy awards.

3. . . . *And the Rain My Drink* portrays the final years of the British rule in Malaya and is considered the most exhaustive picture of this particular period of time in the colonial history of the region. It describes the great thirst for independence of the two peoples side by side inhabiting Malaya, namely the Muslim Malays and the Chinese national minority, and it emphasizes the great Chinese guerilla's contribution to liberation of Malasia from the white rule. Han Suyin gives an informative record on the brutality of the British special service in handling the situation, their failed attempts to suppress the upheaval, numerous penal re-settlings of whole villages of Chinese rubber-tappers to the unhealthy marshlands far away from the rubber-tree plantations, and imprisonments, torturing and blackmailing both of the participants in the liberation movement, and the innocent uninvolved citizens.

4. *The Mountain is Young* takes place in Nepal. Seemingly entirely fictitious, the book can well be regarded as a literary transposition of the author's difficult experience in the final stages of her unhappy second marriage with the Englishman Leonard Comber, and of her first encounter of the Indian army colonel, Vincent Ruthnaswamy, the devoted third husband for the rest of her life. The book is written in a confessional manner and bears many symptoms of a specific inner catharsis.

5. *Two Loves* embraces two novelettes entitled *Cast But One Shadow* and *Winter Love*. The predominant trait which links these two quite extraordinary pieces of prose is the difficult feelings between the main heroes, in both cases induced by the events of the World War II.



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6. *The Four Faces* is written in Han Suyin's favourite, although not very frequently practised, farcical/detective story manner, simultaneously intermingled with tragedy. The framework is indisputably farcical: the Neutralist Congress of Writers struggling for some goals, which in the book remain rather unclear and taking place in the minuscule Kingdom of Cambodia, ruled by Prince Norodom Sihanouk. Parallel to this literary event, power politics, intrigues and corruption are continuously orchestrated by the world's superpowers. Living for a considerable period of time in South-East Asia, and herself a spectator of similar events on the everyday basis, Han Suyin has given us, in this novel, truth concealed as fiction. Upon this background, a nymphomaniac English girl is introduced, who accompanies to the congress her intellectual father and an equally intellectual step-mother. During the congress, she gets involuntarily involved in a criminal affair and eventually gets murdered in quite obscure circumstances. In this way, one personal tragedy intermingles with farce. Once again, Han Suyin proved an indefatigable and masterful investigator of the most intimate human feelings, and a reliable interpreter thereof.

7. *Till Morning Comes* tells a history of love and marriage of a Chinese doctor and a young American journalist in the period before the Communist takeover in China and closely thereafter. The Author furnishes a fascinating description of the racially mixed family, and the psychological problems of their racially mixed offspring. In many ways, the author writes from her own personal experience, as she herself originates from a mixed (Belgian-Chinese) family. Professions of the main personages involved the journalist and the medical doctor resemble those of Han Suyin and Ian Morrison, although ascribed to the opposite sexes.

8. *The Enchantress* shows Han Suyin's unsurpassed mastery in creating top-quality fiction, which is like a powerful volcano eruption of untamed fantasy. As usual, the book is composed of a more general framework, with an incrustation in the form of a dreamworld and unfulfilled love between the twin brother and sister. The book's events take place in the eighteenth century in Lausanne, then the real Mecca of clock-making and the construction of precision clockwork machines that look human, draw pictures, play music, and are the rage of Europe. The orphaned teenage brother and sister already are the skilled constructors of such automata, and forced by some unfavourable external events abandon Europe and travel a long way to the court of Chinese emperors, to serve them with their highly esteemed and precious craftsmanship. Eventually, they have to flee China, spending about twelve years in Thailand. Finally, they return to Lausanne. With this fascinating fiction, Han Suyin seems to pay a personal tribute to the land of her birth, China; to the area of her past residence for so many years, South-East Asia; and to the place of her present residence, Lausanne.



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### (iii) Sociopolitical Essays and Other Written Testimonies:

Han Suyin's interest in the economic, social and political issues of China and the rest of the contemporary world is only too obvious. In the course of her life, she has always been actively engaged in these problems, struggling hard for the world's recognition of China as a sovereign and successfully developing state, while opposing any form of racism, social injustice, the crushing domination in global politics, and the economy of the world's superpowers. She has also supported women's rights. Apart from lecture tours through the academic centres of the United States, Western Europe and Australia, in this highly ethical struggle Han Suyin has always very actively engaged her exquisite and seasoned pen, too. The outcome is three books, discussed below. It seems most probable that many occasional, yet equally invaluable papers, dispersed in various different pamphlets, have gone irreversibly lost.

1. "China in the Year 2001" formulates certain prognoses concerning future development of various different sectors of the Communist China's political, economic, and social life, reaching even beyond the year 2000.

2. "Lhasa, the Open City: A Journey to Tibet" reports on Han Suyin's reconnaissance visit to Tibet just after the Cultural Revolution. She reminds the historical, many centuries long and so to say natural vassalage (or gravitation) of Tibet toward China and then the nineteenth-century British machinations, aimed at a strategic conquer of all the immediate environments of Himalaya (Tibet included). She praises a perceptible, huge material progress of Tibet under the Communist Chinese rule, in fact transformation of Tibet from a backward, medieval theocracy into the capable, educated, and productive lay society. As a medical doctor, she recalls multiple abhorring prejudices from Tibet's not very distant religious past, like a compulsory auto da fa of these mothers (obviously, along with their new-born babies), who had just delivered twins, or any higher multiplets. Such deliveries in the traditional Tibetan culture had been recognized as a severe punishment for human sins and a particularly bad omen, which needed to be eradicated from the earth's surface immediately. Another prejudice of a similar sort consisted in forcing Tibetan women to delivering their babies in the yak-sheds and then to remaining in those filthy and repulsive hiding-places for the so-called purification period, the practise which often ended with the confined woman's infection and death. In spite of this fully rational argumentation, the paramount ethical question of the small nation's right to independence remains in the book untackled, and the author's position on this particular issue seems to remain in agreement not only with the current political doctrine of Communist China, but with the centuries old political doctrines of the Imperial China as well.





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3. *Tigers and Butterflies. Selected Writings on Politics, Culture and Society* is a collection of essays, originally written from 1960 til 1989, and published in various Chinese, American, and British journals. These essays furnish a testimony of the author's extraordinary sensitivity to human misery, encountered on her trips around the globe, and testify to the indestructible will to struggle hard against any racial prejudice, or social injustice.

Literary achievement can by no means be separated from the personality of its creator. And this personality starts moulding from the very beginning. I keep Han Suyin's fifth autobiographical volume - *Phoenix Harvest* - in front of me, open on an episode from Chapter 11, "The End and the Beginning." In this episode she describes her parents difficult family life in the pre-revolutionary China and her own difficult early years:

"Their decades together were of sorrow and pain and insecurity, of war and running away and making do; and seeing their children despised for being Eurasians. Only I had the courage (or the foolishness) to scream against the general contempt for Eurasians, 'But we are the future.'"

Han Suyin was born to a prickly crack between the two worlds, white and yellow, in fact as an innerly displaced person. It is going to remain a secret of her incredible genius, how she eventually managed to preserve inner integrity and to turn her uncomfortable origin into an admirable fortitude. The only thing we know for sure is that she had very early -- as a university beginner aged sixteen -- adopted a race for her own, namely Chinese. We can also suspect that -- in emotional terms at least -- this adoption was not entirely charge-free. Since that meaningful moment of undertaking the most personal life decision of self-definition, Han Suyin remained faithful to the Confucian obligations of a proper mandarin class member, an important one being fierce Chinese patriotism.

In a sense, she has never betrayed her beloved China, not even the anti-landlord and anti-bourgeois rioting new land under Communist rule. Because of that, in various different white Western and also overseas Chinese circles she was negatively stamped as a Communist and to a very large extent deprived of a well deserved high attention and esteem, due to her as to a charismatic spokeswoman of her own people.



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In her autobiographical / historical series (starting from *The Crippled Tree*, and ending with *Phoenix Harvest*, or perhaps even with *Wind in My Sleeve*), Han Suyin undertakes an effort to continue -- in an entirely modern manner -- the classical Chinese literary tradition of the famous Books of Generations. Such clan memoirs used to be written by the clan leaders and passed from one generation to another, to be dutifully continued in the future. In her series, Han Suyin spans the time distance from the generation of her grandparents to that of hers and her brother, sisters, and cousins.

The turbulent and often cruel making of modern China, her unprecedented blitz jump from the five millennia of feudal slavery to the modern age, furnish a really breathtaking setting. Han Suyin's prose is infallibly addressed to a Western audience, with an absolutely idealistic and noble aim to bridge an intellectual and emotional rift between the East and the West. E.g., she introduces us to the mysterious world of Third Uncles, Second Aunts, First Cousins, respectable concubines, and the traditionally robed, elegant retired eunuchs with wives and children, once the clerics to the former imperial court. Also to Peking of rikshaw-pullers and beggars, who had by hundreds lived and died right in the streets of this exuberant capital city. The Communist Revolution of 1949 is covered in a matter-of-fact manner, like an overpowering natural event, similar to thunderstorm, torrential rain, or volcano eruption. Last but not least, Han Suyin attempts to explain the aims and goals of post-revolutionary Communist policies, with their numerous successes, but also numerous unnecessary zig-zags and blunders.

An ineffable leitmotif of all this narration is China's continuous effort to be widely and internationally recognized as a fully sovereign state, inhabited by educated and capable citizens, and its permanent attempt to get rid of the memories of this humiliating pre-Communist past, when China had been to a large extent secretly governed by the world's former superpowers, in their extraterritorial districts located on Chinese soil being impudent enough to commit such excesses as, e.g., banning equally dogs and Chinese (including Han Suyin and her father) from their parks and other respectable public places.

There were two men in modern history of China, most responsible for making and further development of the Communist state, the Great Helmsman Chairman Mao (plebeian by birth), and the charismatic Premier Zhou Enlai. Han Suyin devoted voluminous biographies to both of them, yet -- in my opinion -- of a deeply unequal artistic value. Nothing wrong can be written about Chairman Mao's biography in two volumes.



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However, in the tumultuous jungle of dates and facts, Chairman Mao's personality comes out somewhat stifled and colourless. An overall impression of a reverential, learned and somewhat boring historical treatise is the only flash left in the non-academic reader's mind.

To the contrary, *Eldest Son. Zhou Enlai and the Making of Modern China, 1898 - 1976* is probably among the best biographies of the top world statesmen ever written. It is noteworthy that this biography was to a large extent shaped upon the materials coming from Han Suyin's eleven meetings with Premier Zhou Enlai and also from her approximately sixty personal visits to Communist China, starting from the year 1956.

Han Suyin's reverence and admiration for Premier Zhou Enlai are evident and enormous. They both originate from the mandarin class. In their childhood days, contempt for the poor was omnipresent among the people of their stand and there was no chance for making a considerable evolutionary social progress. On the other hand, patriotic Chinese elites felt a great urge for rapid scientific and technical modernization of their land.

Han Suyin views Premier Zhou Enlai as a man with modern education and perfect understanding of his people and time, who had realized rather early in life that the social retardation of his people lasting several millennia could not be just skipped over without a fairly violent social eruption. She reveres his sharp vision and a courage to participate in this boisterous transformation in spite of everything, and she attempts to disclose both his inner motives to do so and the true political role he had once voluntarily taken upon himself. Han Suyin describes Zhou Enlai as an entirely selfless man, on the one hand wholeheartedly dedicated to strengthening China's position on international level, and on the other attempting to protect his own people from the repeated ideological follies of the top Communist leadership.

Han Suyin's literary achievement is far from one-sided and it is not only her Chinese flock for whom she feels responsible. She was born to a sort of an emotional vacuum between the two races, which made her very early reflect on the issues of the profound human feelings and of the painful deficiency thereof. Her autobiographical volumes give multiple evidence of a fundamental misunderstanding between her and her mother, which resulted in a lack of normal, affectionate mother-to-daughter relationship in childhood and in later days as well. One of her bitter discoveries as a teenager was that -- for certain people at least -- being Eurasian quasi-automatically meant being a prostitute. In her later adult life, she did experience two unhappy marriages and a tragically terminated great love affair with Ian Morrison, prior to her successful third marriage.





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All of Han Suyin's books, even if some contain intended farcical elements, ought to be read attentively and in great seriousness. Many of them tackle the issues of interracial emotional relationships and usually lack easy, super-optimistic diagnoses. All of them show an unsurpassed mastery in handling the world of human feelings and in one way or another articulate the author's deep fascination with a subtle, profoundly intellectual rather than merely sensual love.

Han Suyin is not only an expert Sinologist, not only a medical doctor by profession, but also a seasoned psychoanalyst and an exquisite connoisseur of the human heart, which is always one and the same throughout the ages and through the world. In one phone talk, I questioned her about certain racial issues. Her answer came to me rapidly, like lightning: "Listen, madam, how many races do YOU know? Because I know only one race, HUMAN race."

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